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Full Length Research Paper

Gossip Girl setting fashion trends: Lebanese young viewers' identification with media characters

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This article aims at expanding the knowledge of identification with the fashion of media characters on the series Gossip Girl (Schwartz and Savage, 2007). Since the subject has already been investigated abroad, this article helps gain an understanding of the topic in Lebanon, and its influence on Lebanese female teenagers and young adults. The theory of Identification is adopted throughout the study. The article uses a qualitative research method to analyse a series of interviews with eighteen Lebanese females, between the ages of 16 and 26 years old. The interview questions are explored under four themes: the fashion element of Gossip Girl, similarities, imitation and identification. The main findings indicate that the interviewees are aware of the prominent fashion element of the series and imitate their favourite characters in terms of fashion styles. This leads to the deduction of identification with Gossip Girl characters' fashion styles.

Key words: Gossip Girl, identification, imitation, fashion, style, lifestyle, media characters, Lebanese audience.

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the first episode of the Gossip Girl series (Schwartz and Savage, 2007) aired on the CW Network of the United States television. The plot was based in New York, more specifically in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where all the elite families lived glamorously and luxuriously. The show talked about a group of over-privileged high school students. The story went on for six seasons about love, betrayal, and the decadent lives of millionaires (The CW, 2008). There had been many teen dramas resembling this impersonal script. Nevertheless, the distinctive element that made the show stand out was its wardrobe; all created by the stylist Eric Damam (La Ferla, 2008). Throughout the episodes and the seasons,

characters appeared with the most varied kinds of clothing, making fashion the main topic of interest. In fact, every episode featured either a designer's name or a designer's dress on one of the characters. With this much focus on the wardrobe, how was the audience affected by the fashion choices of the characters?

The purpose is to examine the level of identification of Lebanese viewers with Gossip Girl's fashion trend setting. This article brings new insight to previous studies of television series as it adds the dimension of the Lebanese viewers and how they are influenced by the series' main characters: Blair Waldorf and Serena Van Der Woodsen. It will be determined whether Lebanese

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teenagers and young adults identify with these characters by adopting their signature pieces, imitating their fashion sense and setting their trends. It is worth mentioning that the interviewees come from Lebanese backgrounds and cultures different from those of the United States and Europe. In order to study how young Lebanese female viewers identify with Gossip Girl characters and imitate their fashion style, the following research questions are addressed:

1. RQ1: Are young Lebanese female viewers aware of the prominent fashion element in *Gossip Girl*?
2. RQ2: Do young Lebanese female viewers find similarities with the characters on *Gossip Girl*?
3. RQ3: Do young Lebanese female viewers imitate the fashion styles of the characters they identify with?
4. RQ4: Do young Lebanese female viewers identify with *Gossip Girl* characters, and is this identification prominent fashion-wise?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although, an extensive amount of academic literature is available on identification with media characters on series, this phenomenon is still unexplored in Lebanon. Therefore, the following literature review attempts to understand why and how viewers from around the world identify with media characters' fashion styles on different shows.

Viewers' identification with media characters' fashion styles

Television shows are carefully cast in a way that the characters' physical appearances as well as their clothing styles develop in the eyes of the audience. In their research *entitled 'Effects of the "beauty is good" stereotype on children's information processing'*, Ramsey and Langlois (2002) found that physical appearance was related to identification with the character when it came to girls.

   The highly symbolic elements of a television series are related to physical appearance. Hair and clothes qualify as highly symbolic elements. The shows that transmit these trends are called "trendy shows" and two examples are *Friends* (Crane and Kauffman, 1994) and *Beverly Hills 90210* (Spelling and Star, 1990). In the focus groups conducted by Russell and Puto (1999) in their study entitled *'Rethinking television audience measures: an exploration into the construct of audience connectedness'*, the participants appeared to adopt the styles of the characters through which they constructed their personal identities. One example of a trend-setting phenomenon was the haircut of Jennifer Aniston on *Friends* (Crane and Kauffman, 1994) where she

impersonated Rachel Green. In a few months, the hairstyle spread across the nation and had fans discuss it online. Devoted viewers of the show did not simply watch it to follow up with the story, but also to pay careful attention to the styles and clothes. They even created online chat rooms where users discussed fashion trends, fashion tips and specific items found on the show (Russell and Puto, 1999).

   When fashion on a television series contributes to building a character's image, it becomes the focal element of the series. Television programs with a fashion-focused narrative have turned actresses into fashion icons and strengthened the relationship between television and the fashion industry (Warner, 2009). Therefore, the audience would wait for the series to tell them what is hot and what is not and to keep them up to date with the latest trends (Säynäjoki, 2013). Television programs where fashion is an essential component and where characters influence fashion trends are referred to as 'fashion-forward television' (Warner, 2009). *Sex and the City* (Star, 1998) is one of the first fashion-forward television series (Kuruc, 2008). The series introduced fashion trends, and its main character Carrie Bradshaw remains a fashion icon till today. Even until 2012, eight years after the end of the series, there were still online conversations on the homepage of *Sex and the City*'s website revolving around the fashion of the show (Säynäjoki, 2013). The focus groups conducted by Heidi Säynäjoki (2013) in her research paper entitled '*Negotiated Meanings of Fashion-Forward Television Programmes'* showed that viewers of *Sex and the City* (Star, 1998) identified with the four main characters through their fashion styles. In addition, to watching the show, fans also visited websites and took quizzes to see which character they were likely to be and which character's style was similar to theirs (Richards, 2003). This pushed viewers to seek and purchase these specific fashion styles.

Viewers' identification with Gossip Girl fashion styles

Gossip Girl (Schwartz and Savage, 2007) is another example of fashion-forward television programs. The styling of the show was the creation of Eric Damam who was also one of the stylists of *Sex and the City* (Star, 1998). Names of designers like Christian Louboutin, Tory Burch, and Chanel appeared on almost every episode of the series. The fashion habits of the characters were an important aspect of the show. They were similar to *Sex and the City*'s (Star, 1998), since each character had a signature piece that was noticeable throughout the episodes (Pattee, 2006). When celebrating the 100th episode of Gossip Girl, a special report entitled *'Five Years of Iconic Style'* was conducted, filmed, and added as a bonus to the fifth season. It featured the co-creator and executive producer Stephanie Savage, the producer

Amy Kautman and the show's stylist Eric Damam. In the interview, Savage said that fashion played a big role in the long-term success of the show. She could not imagine who the characters would be without thinking of how they expressed themselves through their clothing. For example, Blair Waldorf's character would not 'exist' except through her headbands, shoe collection and Audrey Hepburn inspired vintage outfits.

Savage considered that the stylist Eric Damam knew what he was doing. He was ahead of the statement necklace trend, knowing that it would become fashionable after portraying it on the Serena character. Savage ended her interview by saying she was proud that fashion represented the show. The fashion community embraced it to a point where Karl Lagerfeld said 'Gossip Girl has inspired me'. The interview went on with Eric Damam who mentioned that up till the 100th episode, 100,000 wardrobe changes were made. Blair's headbands became trendy and seen everywhere. The front page of the *New York Times* revealed an article about the clothes of the show and their impact on sales. Bloggers, one of whom was Micah Jesse, were also interviewed about *Gossip Girl*. Jesse explained that there were blogs dedicated to who wore what on each episode, and how one could find and style it at home. He believed that there was a fantasy element to the styles that fans could emulate (Gossip Girl season 5, January 30, 2012). It is often unusual for high fashion designers to feature their clothes on television shows because the shoots extend for weeks and the haute couture dresses have to stay on set for that long. Nevertheless, when *Gossip Girl* aired and influenced sales, designers such as Tory Burch and Elie Saab had their names mentioned and their designs worn on the series. This marketing strategy allowed the audience to see the character they identify with wearing the designs. Therefore, in order to imitate this character, the viewers would be influenced to purchase the designers' clothes (Rubin, 2012). The cast's wardrobes also featured Yves Saint Lauren, Lanvin, Moschino and new designers such as Mary Kantrantzou. Even if fans could not always afford the designers' items, they clamoured for a little of the look however, they could get it (Rubin, 2012). Many Gossip Girl fans believed that imitating the characters' fashion on the show would allow them to have a similar glamorous life (Irving, 2008).

A study conducted by Zixuan Zhou (2011) entitled '*The Impact of American Television on Chinese College Students'* showed that the Chinese audience accessed American Television series through the internet within hours of them airing in the States (Zhou, 2011). The interesting part was that *Gossip Girl* affected both viewers and non-viewers when it came to fashion. In fact, clothing stores in Shanghai advertised their items with announcements like "As seen on *Gossip Girl*" (Zhou, 2011).

Marie Romeo also studied the fashion effects of *Gossip Girl* on viewers' in her 2009 research paper entitled *'Gossip Girl and its effects on viewers' fashion'*. According to her, characters were perceived by the audience as fictional peers and role models. When viewers identified with characters, they often imitated these characters' clothing choices and hairstyles. Romeo (2009) conducted content analysis on the 12th episode of season one, entitled 'School Lies' (Wharmby, 2008). This study led to two conclusions: first, each character had a signature piece in their wardrobe, and second, fashion was prominent on the show since each character appeared with different clothes numerous times per episode. In addition, Romeo (2009) also conducted in-depth interviews to correlate the fashion of the show with the audience.

The findings showed that each viewer was affected by a specific character rather than by the show as a whole. This led them to imitate the character's fashion style by searching for the same clothing piece or for an exact replica at a lower price. Therefore, Romeo (2009) concluded that viewers identified with the fashion styles of *Gossip Girl*. This identification appeared to be predominant among American girls as revealed in the commentaries and studies found in prominent publications such as *the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Spectator*, *the Leader Post*, and *the Trail Times*. Gossip Girl became more known for its cavalcade of fashion than for its plot, having girls tuning in to judge the clothing (La Ferla, 2008). This led to an impact on retail. Stephanie Solomon, the fashion director of Bloomingdales, said that *Gossip Girl* was one of the biggest influences on how women spent their money on clothes. In fact, fans walked into shops and asked for the exact outfits of their favourite character (La Ferla, 2008). According to Barney in *the Washington Post* (2012), women did not just want to watch Gossip Girl, they wanted to live it. In 2008, *the New York Times* dedicated an article to how the series was conceived as a fashion marketing vehicle. In fact, some fall designers collections such as Marc by Marc Jacobs resurged school-girl like looks on their runways. Stefani Greenspan, another designer, admitted that Gossip Girl was part of her new line's inspiration. The show even had websites where viewers could click on each episode, select a clothing piece and purchase it online. Shop managers and designers witnessed an increase in sales after the airing of episodes where their brands were mentioned. Rachel Grinney, manager of Intermix in Washington, talked about her customers seeking Serena's haute bohemian mix style. Ms Lepore, a New York designer, received calls within days of her dress appearing on the show with the mention of her brand, and Tory Burch found that having an item of her collection on *Gossip Girl* translated into sales (Kwan, 2008).

Theoretical framework: Identification

Throughout the literature review, it has been demonstrated

demonstrated that television shows influence viewers who identify with the characters. Identification is defined as a behavioural process where a viewer takes on the attitude and appearance of a character they like and feel similar to (Cohen, 2001). The theoretical framework of identification discussed in this part revolves around a psychological overview of identification and an explanation of the concept of imitation.

A psychological approach to identification

Theorists like Sigmund Freud and Kenneth Burke used identification as a bond between two persons. In his book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud (1921) dedicated a full chapter to identification. He first defined it as the expression of an emotional tie with another person. Freud distinguished three main kinds of identification: primary identification, narcissist identification, and partial identification. Partial identification was the framework developed later on by other researchers such as Bandura (1969). It is based on what one sees in another person. Partial identification happens with a leading figure, or a person that shares common grounds and interest. This mechanism contributes to the development of character and personality through two main concepts: imitation and empathy. Imitation is the behavioural concept through which an individual observes another and copies their behaviour. As for empathy, it is the possibility to put oneself in another's shoes and understand what they are feeling from their own perspective (Hopper, 2010). Previous psychological theories were cast before the technological advances of the digital world and media, and therefore gave the latter less attention. In a more recent study of the social cognitive theory in relation with mass communication, Bandura (2001) discussed vicarious capability as people's capacity to learn from observing different models in order to expand their skills and knowledge. A vast amount of this behavioural learning occurs not only through observing models from a direct environment, but also from the environment of the mass media. In fact, through media, one model can transmit new behaviour to countless people.

As maintained by Bandura (2001), symbolic modelling is being a behavioural model to not only one, but many observers. Therefore, it influences behavioural and social changes worldwide (Bandura, 2001). Social networks spread and support the diffusion of new behaviour patterns. Through television and social media, people are directly linked to the media source, with little to no interconnection among each other. Therefore, people from different locations share ideas and information through interactive electronic networking, thus, influencing adoptive behaviour (Bandura, 2001). Instagram is one of these rising social networking platform. It was launched in October 2010 and gained rapid and growing popularity all the way to the present

(DesMarais, 2013). It is used to share pictures and videos by people who follow each other and have similar tastes. An analysis of the social network Instagram in relation to Gossip Girl showed that 49 Instagram accounts were dedicated to the series and named 'Gossip Girl' or derivatives (Instagram, 2015). In addition, the concept of hash tags is widely used on social media as words or phrases preceded by the hash sign # and used to identify messages on specific topics. Clicking on the hash tagged word would lead to a series of pictures related to that specific word. The hash tag of 'Gossip Girl' on Instagram led to the result of 1,086,494 pictures related to the series (Instagram, 2015).

Identification and imitation

Identification develops in the early stages of life (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents identify with others and imitate certain aspects of their characteristics, which results in shaping these adolescents' identities (Erikson, 1968). Nowadays, the youth is more exposed to media than to parents and peers. These 'fictive friends' become the main model to identify with. In fact, teenagers identify with celebrities and embrace what they promote by internalizing their actions (Basil, 1996). The process of identification creates within the viewer feelings of affinity towards the character, similarities with this character, and a desire to model the character (Liebes and Katz, 1990). Therefore, media directors and writers create characters with the specific features with which they want viewers to identify (Cohen, 2001). Identification leads to imitation. The unconscious act of identification prompts the viewer to consciously copy and imitate the character (Maccoby and Wilson, 1957). Imitation and wishful identification have in common the desire to be like the admired media character. The difference lies in the fact that imitation is an action, while wishful identification remains a desire (Maccoby and Wilson, 1957).

Modelling and imitation are related factors. Imitation is a shallow and short-term expression of identification with the character while modelling has a long-term effect in shaping a person's identity. Celebrities are usually emulated by the audience because they have characteristics any normal person wishes to possess (Boon and Lomore, 2001). According to Cohen (2001), identification with a character cannot be controlled by the viewer whereas, imitation is a conscious and controlled behaviour. On another hand, Kelman (1961) and Basil (1996) stated that identification could be used as a process for social influence. In fact, in order to persuade the viewer of a certain message, media makes the source of the message appealing, rather than the message itself.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design that is used to carry out this study is a

qualitative design that follows inductive reasoning, using semi-structured interviews with Lebanese young women between the ages of 16 and 26 years old who are avid viewers of *Gossip Girl*. Because a very small minority of teenage Lebanese males watch Gossip Girl, let alone are affected by it, the study included females solely. Gossip Girl as a fashion-forward television program targets 16 to 34 years old women (Fox News, 2013). This study targeted an age group of 16 to 26, because after asking a number of Lebanese women who have watched the series and are above the age of 26, it was found that Lebanese female adults above the age of 26 lost interest in the series and its fashion. This age group was chosen also because the participants should have acquired a certain level of education (minimum high-school), they should have access to satellite channels which presumably assumes that they had access to Gossip Girl on Fox TV, or they should have previously acquired the DVDs for the series, or they should also have internet access to watch the episodes online. The sample was selected from the Lebanese high schools: College des Soeurs des Saints-Coeurs Catholiques Kfarhbab, and Notre-Dame Jamhour because the students in these schools met the requirements of the sampling and some of them were acquaintances of the researcher.

Other participants were female adults either studying in universities such as Notre Dame University-Louaize, Universite Saint-Esprit Kaslik (Holy Spirit University of Kaslik), American University of Beirut, and Lebanese American University. Eighteen girls were interviewed from these different fields, eight of them being teenagers up to eighteen years old, and ten of them being young adults raging from twenty to twenty-six years old. A qualitative research design is optimal in this case because it gives a more in-depth insight on identification through the long and detailed answers of the interviewees. It allows the researcher to dig into the answers and find the common ground that leads to the research questions' themes. Eventually, the study establishes an identification of the Lebanese female audience with the fashion styles of Gossip Girl's characters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to establish identification of female Lebanese viewers with the fashion styles of *Gossip Girl* characters, the interviews' findings should relate to the scholar literature discussed previously. The participants' answers are analysed below under four themes: the fashion element of *Gossip Girl*, the identification through similarities, the identification through imitation, and the identification with the fashion styles of Gossip Girl's characters. Each theme answers one of the research questions of this study.

Fashion element of Gossip Girl

It is important to determine whether the interviewed girls are aware of the prominent fashion element of the series; as it is what Gossip Girl mostly revolves around according to the literature review. The interviewees had interesting answers when they were asked to describe the show's plot. Specific adjectives were redundant in all eighteen answers. While 'gossip', 'friends', 'characters' and 'relationships' were mentioned once or twice, the words 'glamorous lifestyles', 'events' and 'money' appeared in nine answers. It was found that the words

'brands', 'wardrobe', 'outfits', 'designer clothes' and 'fashion' were mentioned seventeen times when describing what the show was about. This answers the first research question: *are Lebanese viewers aware of the prominent fashion element in Gossip Girl?* Lebanese female viewers are aware of the prominent fashion element of the show, since what struck them and stayed with them after the end of the series was not the story, but rather the wardrobe. A majority of eleven girls agreed that they would be willing to watch *Gossip Girl* all over again only to see what the characters were wearing and how they styled their clothes on each episode.

Identification through similarities

The analysis of the similarity theme leads to the answer of the second research question: *does the Lebanese audience find similarities with the characters on Gossip Girl?* Lebanese girls do find similarities with their favourite characters on the show. Some of them find physical similarities while others find behavioural ones. When it comes to the lifestyle, the similarities found are the ones of friendships and school drama, but no similarities are found with the glamorous and expensive lifestyle. In fact, one of the interviewees stated 'we cannot decide to travel anytime we want, or leave the house without permission'. These findings diverge from the ones found on similarities in the literature review of Hoffner (1996) and previously mentioned. In fact, whereas the girls found physical and behavioral similarities with their favorite characters, they could not find any resemblances with the perfect lifestyle of the characters on the show, which they idealized instead. This deduces an idealization of the characters' lifestyle based on many responses beginning with the words "I wish". This idealization could also be related to the wishful identification found in the literature review; a desire to have the character's lifestyle, without being able to portray it in reality.

Identification and imitation

Imitation is the shallow representation of identification. The act of imitation in this study is divided between emulating Serena, and emulating Blair. The interviewees were asked to name famous brands mentioned on the show and if these brands were found in Lebanon. All eighteen respondents were able to identify Chanel, Jimmy Choo, Christian Louboutin, Tory Burch, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and the Lebanese designers Elie Saab and Zuhair Murad. This showed that all of them were aware of the brands cited on the show. Nevertheless, when asked if they went after the brands or the style of the clothes, all eighteen interviewees answered that they went for the same style found in stores such as Zara, Vero Moda, Aizone, Pull and Bear, Mango and Massimo Dutti. The Lebanese teenagers and young adults interviewed came

from upper-middle and upper social classes. They were well aware of the brands cited on the show and knew where the shops could be found in Lebanon. Yet, they considered the brands to be too expensive for them to purchase. This led them to find similar items elsewhere at affordable prices. Therefore, all the girls who identify with either Serena or Blair emulate their fashion styles one way or the other, and try to seek specific similar pieces at lower prices. This diverges from the literature review found in *The Spectator* (2008*), The Washington Post* (2012) and *the New York Times* (2008) where it was said that American teenagers would hear the name of a designer piece on the show, and rush to the same designer shop the second day in order to purchase the identical item. This could probably be due to the Lebanese socio-economic status that is different from the one in the United States, where according to the literature review findings, teenagers could afford high-end brands of the same clothes and accessories seen on the show.

Gossip Girl setting fashion trends in Lebanon

Another question asked to the interviewees was whether they found that Gossip Girl became trendy and changed fashion styles in Lebanon: Gossip Girl setting fashion trends in Lebanon. The general answer was unanimous: Gossip Girl set fashion trends in Lebanon, and became popular amongst friends. Nine of the girls were alumni or current student at Sœurs des Saints-Cœurs Catholiques Kfarhbab high-school (SSCC). They all stated that their high school uniform was identical to the series': the pleated skirt, the white shirt and the socks. After watching Gossip Girl, all the girls started wearing their skirts high-waist, and their socks knee-high. Friends would discuss the series at school, talking about the previous episode, and predicting what would happen in the upcoming episode. One of the participants noticed new Instagram accounts dedicated to Serena and Blair where posts of their fashion styles were found online for everyone interested to see. These findings show a strong engagement of the Lebanese girls with the series and allow the researcher to answer the third research question: *do viewers imitate the fashion styles of the characters they identify with?* Lebanese female viewers translate identification into action by imitating the fashion style of their favourite character. After watching episodes of the show, they go to fast-fashion stores to find the same clothes and accessories they saw on the series and purchase them. In addition, they imitate the daily lives of the fictional character for maximum similarity.

Identification with gossip girl characters' fashion styles

The analysis of the identification theme answers the fourth research question: *do Lebanese viewers identify with Gossip Girl characters, and is this identification prominent fashion-wise?* The interviewees found physical similarities with their favourite characters and lived vicarious experiences imagining they were wearing the characters' clothes and accessories and living their shopping sprees. They also underwent the concept of imitation; they went on trying to find similar clothes and styles to the ones of their favourite characters (some examples are headbands like Blair and Bohemian chic clothes like Serena). Gossip Girl also spread fashion trends among the interviewees and their circle of friends since most of them started dressing and acting like the characters on the show. The findings deduced from the interviewees' answers allow the researcher to conclude that the Lebanese audience of Gossip Girl goes through identification with the characters prominently not only in terms of fashion but also in terms of lifestyle.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the participants were found to imitate the fashion of *Gossip Girl* characters by purchasing replicas of the clothes seen on the show. In addition, most of high school interviewees acknowledged taking on their favourite character's attitude and school appearance. Lebanese viewers also found similarities between themselves and the characters in terms of friendship ups and downs. Nevertheless, despite the differences between the Lebanese and American cultures, both admitted to not leading an identical glamorous lifestyle as the one of the show. The extravagant way of life remains a fictional one. This means that although, Americans have easier access to designer clothes and can afford them more than Lebanese viewers, both audiences still go through wishful identification and vicarious experiences, simply coveting the character's life rather than having the means to experience it in reality. Therefore, after answering the research questions of this article, it can be said that Lebanese young female viewers identify with the fashion styles of Gossip Girl's characters and the show set fashion trends among its audience.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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